

L2 Processing of Information Structure: The Role of Word Order and Pronominalization in German.

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Recent work by Sorace and Filiaci (2006) has shown that while narrow syntax appears to be acquirable by L2 learners, they show difficulty integrating information from different cognitive domains, such as at the syntax-discourse interface. Thus far work in this area has relied on offline studies, which do not provide data relating to the time course of processing. Here we address this using a visual-world paradigm, in which participants' eye-movements are recorded during simultaneous presentation of a visual scene and auditorily presented linguistic input.

The study is based on work by Kaiser and Trueswell (2004) who looked at word order alternations in Finnish, where canonical SVO word order has a neutral information structure (IS), but OVS order signals that the postverbal NP is likely to be new, or previously unmentioned. We extend their work to German and furthermore manipulate whether the preverbal NP was a lexical NP or pronoun. It is predicted that use of a pronoun affects the IS of a sentence, as pronouns are frequently used to refer to a previously mentioned entity.

Our participants are native speakers of German and adult L2 German learners with English L1. It was predicted that the L2 learners would be sensitive to the IS implications of the pronouns relative to the lexical NPs, as English uses pronouns in a similar manner to German, however, since English has a relatively fixed word order, acquisition of the IS implications of word order alternations may be problematic.

Participants viewed a scene with three entities, such as a boss and two secretaries while listening to short texts. These texts consisted of a context sentence, in which two of the three entities, e.g. the boss and one of the secretaries were mentioned and identified by location ("work near the door"), followed by the target sentence, which was either an SVO or OVS order sentence, the preverbal constituent being either a full NP or a pronoun unambiguously marked for case. The postverbal constituent is then ambiguous between the mentioned and unmentioned entity, i.e. in this example it could refer to either of the secretaries.

Results obtained suggest that in contrast to Finnish, native speakers of German predicted the postverbal NP in OVS sentences to be more likely to be the mentioned entity. However, the L2 learners were not sensitive to word order alternations, but were instead sensitive to the effect of NP type prior to the onset of the postverbal NP. Also, both groups showed that over time the probability of either entity being the intended referent of the postverbal NP changed. These data suggest an important role for transfer in the development of the syntax-discourse interface.

References

- Kaiser, E. and Trueswell, J.C. (2004) The role of discourse context in the processing of a flexible word-order language. *Cognition* 94(2) 113-147
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